

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 158 332

CS 204 347

AUTHOR Beck, Robert E.
TITLE A Love Star, a Little Mockingbird, and a Lot of Bull.
PUB DATE Apr 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference (6th, Dallas, Texas, April 7-8, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Theories; *English Instruction; *Noninstructional Responsibility; Secondary Education; *Secondary School Teachers; *Teacher Responsibility; *Teaching Conditions; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Using humor, illustrations, and practical experience, the author suggests that theories and philosophies of education offer the teacher of English little help because of the infinite number of exceptions to any theories when it comes to teaching English, as well as the enormous number of administrative, disciplinary, and extracurricular demands on the time of the teacher and the lack of continuity in attendance on the part of students due to such things as illnesses, speech contests, funerals, and uncounted athletic competitions. He goes on to say that the lot of the secondary English teacher is to naively and romantically continue to attend sessions of workshops, hoping to discover a star to reach for or a theory to hang an ideal on to and to avoid getting mired in despair. He concludes that teaching English in the secondary school is to dream the impossible dream and that the ability to judge the success or failure of the struggle of the teacher and students together in the classroom is reserved for heaven. (TJ)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

Robert E. Beck

A LONE STAR, A LITTLE MOCKINGBIRD,
AND A LOT OF BULL

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND
USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

by Robert E. Beck

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRO-
DUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM
THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGIN-
ATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS
STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT
OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

(The first half of a tandem keynote address, delivered on April 7, 1978, with Professor William Jenkins of Florida International University, at the Fifth Annual NCTE Secondary School English Conference in Dallas, Texas: "Tackling the Horns of the Dilemma: Putting Theory into Practice.")

Good Morning.

You needn't be a Texan to see why the star and the cattle are appropriate for the title of this presentation. But even if you are a Texan, you may be surprised to learn that the rest of the title refers to the official Texas state bird.

In correspondence with Professor Jenkins, who will give the other half of this presentation, I learned that one matter to which he will address himself is the need for articulation in the work of elementary and secondary teachers. I hope you will agree with that point as much as I do. I know from experience that our elementary colleagues can teach us a great deal about teaching. In fact, one of the most memorable lessons about education I've ever had is something I heard while visiting a first-grade classroom.

The teacher was reading a fable to the pupils. The story was called "How the Mockingbird Builds Her Nest." It went like this:

All the birds of the air admired the way Madge Mockingbird builds her nest. So they sent a committee to ask her how she does it.

"Well," said Madge Mockingbird. "Gather round me, and I'll show you. —First you take some mud and form a neat round cake."

The Thrush twittered with delight. "So THAT'S how you do it!" And off she fluttered, singing:

QUIT, QUIT, QUIT!
THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT!

ED158332

CS 204347

MUD YOU TAKE
AND MAKE A CAKE.
QUIT, QUIT, QUIT!

And that's all the Thrush ever learned about nest-building.

Then the Mockingbird arranged some twigs in the mud.

The Owl huffed, "I knew all this before I came!" And she swooped into the air, hooting:

TU WHIT! TU WHO!
I KNEW! I KNEW!
I'LL BUILD MY NEST
AS I ALWAYS DO!

During the next step, Madge Mockingbird put a second layer of twigs over the mud.

Arriving late, the Bluebird sized up what Madge had already done and what she was about to do. "Ah! THAT'S how you build your nest!" shrieked the Bluebird. And off she flew, crying:

SHREE! SHREE!
I SEE! I SEE!
FIRST MUD AND TWIGS:
THEN TWIGS AND MUD:
THAT'S ENOUGH FOR ME!

Then Madge Mockingbird took more twigs and wound them round the outside to make the nest strong and firm.

The Sparrow, cocking her head from time to time, had watched the sun climb higher overhead. By now it stood in the center of the sky. "Time for lunch!" the Sparrow chirped. And away she sailed, trilling:

TWEET! TWEET! TWEET!
TIME FOR ME TO EAT!

It went on that way till Madge Mockingbird approached the very end of the lesson. Then she announced: "I want all of you to practice this for yourselves. But first, there's one final detail." And with that, she lay a small branch across the nest as a perch.

As if on cue, the Turtle Dove murmured lazily:

COOOO! COOOO!
TAKE TWOOO!

"No, no, you silly goose!" Madge snapped. "You don't use two branches! You use only one!"

But the Turtle Dove went right on murmuring:

COOOO! COOOO!
TAKE TWOOO! TAKE TWOOO!

Suddenly looking up from her work, Madge realized that all the rest of the birds had flown away—and that the only pupil who stayed for the end of the lesson had been half asleep from the start.

All of which helps explain why Madge Mockingbird has never tried to teach nest-building again.

In theory, Madge's lesson should run like clockwork. She has quite a bit going for her as a teacher: She's well prepared in her subject field. She's articulate. Her material is logically organized. Motivation should be no problem; after all, the students asked for instruction instead of being compelled to accept it. And Madge is even ready to use the time-honored principle of having her students "learn by doing."

How can a lesson so promising in theory become such a fiasco in practice? — That's a question many of us ask ourselves every day. It isn't enough to chalk up Madge's failure as just one more example of Murphy's Law at work. You all know Murphy's Law: "If anything can go wrong, it will."

No. A group such as this, gathered to reconcile theory with practice, should probe deeper than that. Let's look at what a few theoreticians would say about Madge's problem:

First, the behavioral psychologist. He might tell us, "Madge went wrong from the start. She didn't begin by stating her instructional goals and objectives."

Second, the Education Committee Chair of a State Legislature. She might theorize: "The real fault of Madge's lesson is its lack of a built-in system of accountability."

A theoretician in school law might say, "Madge would make darned sure her lesson worked if she were threatened with a suit for educational malpractice!"

A school board member would probably maintain: "That Mockingbird would have done all right if she had just applied for federal funding!"

And, of course, Walter Cronkite or one of his colleagues could editorialize: "Education is no poorer for the early retirement of Madge Mockingbird. —By what known definition does nest-building count among 'the Basic Skills'?"

Editorialists, school administrators, parents, talk-show callers: everybody in the United States seems to have a theory that could explain where Madge's lesson went wrong—just as it's meant to explain the alleged failure of our schools in general. You know the sorts of things they say:

Person A theorizes that all our problems lie in too little discipline. Person B says they lie in too much.

Person C declares: "The only path to educational success is to be found in freeing and developing student imagination." Person D answers: "All schools really need to stress is good old-fashioned rote-learning of the Three R's!"

And, in specific reference to secondary English: Person E theorizes, "We need to cut out elective courses and go back to rigidly sequenced traditional programs." But Person F replies, "Sequencing in English has never been anything but a myth in the first place. Electives offer the

one chance secondary English as a discipline has to survive!"

The farther removed from the classroom a person is, the greater an authority that person becomes about what ought to be happening there—and the better qualified to generalize about what's wrong with the schools and our work, and about what surefire, handydandy methods will set both to rights.

The title of this presentation promised you a lot of bull. That's just a sample.

With each year's new decline in test scores, it becomes more pointless for a mere classroom teacher like you or me to quarrel with the authorities who rate our performance as lousy.

But don't forget: Every theoretical authority we hear—professional or amateur, in the field of education or out—means something different in talking about education and the schools, just as we ourselves do. Inevitably, each of us is influenced by what he or she has seen and experienced during actual contacts with education. And even if you and I could agree among ourselves on what we mean when we discuss those matters, it would remain pointless for us to try to change all those other minds. We might as well try to persuade the Blind Men of Hindustan that an elephant is not like a rope, not like a fan, and not like a tree trunk. Each person is convinced of his or her perception by the most reliable evidence that can be found: direct personal experience.

Some of us might be tempted to theorize that the real problem is theory itself. Not so. Theory serves many essential functions. Without it, we would presumably still dwell in caves and subsist on roots and herbs.

If you and I had chosen to become architects or nutritionists, we could rely on theories we learned in college to function in the field. Naturally, there would be exceptions. But the exceptions, regardless how numerous, would at least be finite in number.

Instead, heaven help us, we chose to become teachers. And we soon learned that the exceptions in our work—for example, the variables in students' intellectual capacities, personalities, eccentricities, interests, thresholds of boredom, enthusiasms, hostilities, phobias, sensitivities, blind spots—we soon learned that, even at a conservative estimate, exceptions like these are infinite!

Having learned that, it didn't take long for us to observe something else: the only truly reliable theories provided by a teacher's professional preparation are ones pertaining to subject matter.

However, the kaleidoscopic nature of English being what it is, most of what we learned even about subject matter turns out to be chiefly a matter of opinion:

Which of Shakespeare's heroines really is most fully developed as a character?

Should we teach grammar, or shouldn't we? If we should, which of the many different grammars should we teach, and how much of each one? And why?

What is the definition of the simple three-letter English word SET? In the Oxford English Dictionary, more than twenty-two full pages of fine print are devoted to that matter alone.

Or again: Those of us who received any instruction in the teaching of composition might well have found it based on one of two opposing theories: First, that before a student can write successfully, he or she must master English usage, spelling, punctuation, and other mechanics of writing. Second, that the only way a student can learn to write is through the process of writing. Therefore, it's a waste of time to give students lessons in mechanics apart from the composing process.

The whole point I have been trying to make is expressed much more concisely in a theory of my own, a theory perfected only after twenty-eight years' conscientious experimentation in secondary English classrooms. Like most other theories you can actually rely on—old familiar ones such as "parallel lines never intersect" and " $E = MC^2$ "—this one is very brief and simple: "In the teaching of English at the secondary school level, NOTHING WORKS."

Those of you who are experienced teachers, engaged in a career-long search for new ways to improve your instructional programs, never content with what turned out to be "good enough" last week or last year, always seeking something better, may dismiss my theory as too obvious to mention.

Those of you who have staked your career on the same course outline, the same textbook, and the same classroom practices for ten, twenty, or thirty years at a stretch—and yet who still have a job—may consider my theory too frivolous to accept.

And if you are a relative newcomer to English instruction, tremendously certain that when the theories you learned in college don't work it's all your fault; if you are still "following the gleam," still convinced that sooner or later you will find some way to make those theories work—then you may reject my theory as too grim and cynical for serious attention.

Well, obvious my theory may be. Frivolous it may sound. Grim it assuredly is. But don't call it cynical.

The one genuine, dyed-in-the-wool cynic where English teaching is concerned is the person who accepts this theory: that student abilities and performance are foreordained to conform to a bell curve—that self-same bell curve upon which so many professional testmakers stake their careers.

By the way, rumor has it that there still remain in America today half a dozen or so such teachers, certain in their minds that bell curves can and should be devised, like Procrustean beds, to measure the work of students in every group—even including groups of radically differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds and groups involving students afflicted with mental, physical, or emotional learning disabilities—all of whom, as you well realize, other theorists have decided can develop fully and normally only if taught together in the same classroom.

No, it was not cynicism that led to the development of the theory that Nothing Works. On the contrary, until this very year, I had been like you new teachers, blaming myself for the failures of theories. Before this year, no one could shake my faith that at least some humane theories of English instruction would inevitably lead to every student's best and fullest development.

What turned me around? Ironically, it was exactly the kind of congregation of students that should have served to reinforce that perennial conviction: my present seventh-period class.

Just as there are teachers who bring out the best in their students, there are students who bring out the best in their teachers. My seventh-period class is that kind of group. I've had brighter students; I've had more prepossessing ones; but never have I had a class that—for whatever mysterious reason—has been more uniformly conscientious, more eager to learn, more responsive to instruction. In other words, it's the type of class that ought to stimulate and inspire even the weariest, most jaded teacher to lift classroom instruction to the level of art.

How could students such as these convince a teacher, finally and irrevocably, that Nothing Works? —Well, technically speaking, it is not the students themselves who have done it. Instead, it has been their colds, measles, back injuries, broken legs, cases of poison ivy, and Russian flu; it has been their seventh-period appointments with the orthodontist, the allergist, the physical therapist, and their counselors; it has been the calls for them to have yearbook pictures taken, to attend student council meetings, to follow emergency directions from the main office, or to participate in football, basketball, golf, tennis, swimming, baseball, softball, or track; it has been their suspensions from school for smoking in rest rooms or fighting, their science field trips, their cheerleading, their month-long Christmas pilgrimages to ancestral homes in Guadalajara, or their being taken out of school by solicitous, loving parents to attend funerals, to join in family ski trips, or to welcome cousins arriving on planes from Europe.

I want to show you just one week's absence list from that outstanding seventh-period class. And while I do, I want you, please, to think about the impact this typical week's absences had upon attempts to implement just a few very worthy theories: the theory that language, literature, and composition lessons should be interwoven and carefully balanced; the theory that one should achieve variety in scheduling activities and should maintain a suitable classroom pace; the theory that the instructional program should always take into account each of these thirty-six youngster's ethnic, cultural, intellectual, psychological, and emotional exceptionalities—theories of this sort plus

But, for the sake of your own mental health, I caution you not to think about the complexities involved in dealing with the make-up assignments!

9 wks. from January to April											A or E	B or S	C or M	D or U	F	Total				
Pre-College English I	Mo. Day	9th week					Extra week					BOOK NO.	SPECIAL	SPECIAL	DAILY AV.	TESTS	RANK	No. of Day		
		MARCH					April													
		27	28	29	30	31	3	4	5	6	7									
1	ARROYO, GARY					Exc														
2	BAKKER, KELLEY																			
3	BISHOPP, IORI	ab	ab			Exc	ab	ab												
4	BOARD, JOHN					Exc														
5	CAMPBELL, CRAIG					Exc														
6	CEBALLOS, TIKI	ab	ab	ab			ab													
7	DELEGE, RICKEY				at	ab	ab			of										
8	DETOMASI, LARRY	ab				Exc				Exc										
9	DOBBS, LYNN	ab	ab		ab	ab	ab		of	of										
10	DOMINGUEZ, ROBERT				ab					of										
11	FOGED, LARRY	ab				Exc														
12	GILMORE, CATHY		ab		ab		ab	ab												
13	HAMMOND, TIM	ab				ab														
14	HAMMOND, TODD	ab	ab			Exc	ab	ab												
15	HENSLEY, STEVE	ab		ab	at	ab														
16	HUDSON, SHERRY		at		ab															
17	INGLISH, LOREN	ab			ab	ab	of	of	of											
18	JOHNSON, ANTOINETTE					Exc														
19	LEIFFER, LUCY					Exc	ab													
20	MARIA, PAUL		ab	ab		Exc														
21	MARROCCO, MARK					ab	ab	ab	at	ab										
22	MORENO, ANTHONY					ab														
23	OGLETHORPE, ARCH	ab	ab	ab	ab	ab	ab	ab	ab	*										
24	PALLOTTA, CAROL					ab														
25	PARR, CLIFFORD					ab	ab	ab												
26	PARTSCH, FRANK	ab																		
27	QUILICI, DENNIS					ab	ab	Exc	ab											
28	RASMUSSEN, KIM		ab		ab	Exc														
29	RUMMEL, ROBERTA	Exc		ab			Exc		ab											
30	SCHMEIZER, BRENDA		ab			ab														
31	SIMMONS, HOLLY		ab	ab	ab				ab	ab										
32	THOMSON, DEE					ab		ab	at	ab										
33	TOUTOLMIN, JACLYNN	ab		Exc		ab	ab		Exc											
34	UJDUR, SHERRI								Exc											
35	WOOD, TAMMY	ab	ab		ab	ab	ab	ab	ab											
36	ZAMPA, CAROLYN					Exc	ab													
37																				
38																				
39	* Like the other absences, those of Arch Oglethorpe are																			
40	typical. Indeed, he has been absent every day except																			
41	two since the semester began.																			
42																				

Now, I ask you. If a group like that seventh-period class can achieve an absence record like this, what hope can be held out for any theory—especially as it might be applied by some poor, benighted mockingbird?

Yet as surely as we went on from here to theorize that absenteeism is the number-one problem in American schools, any number of you could rise and point out something else: Only when some students are absent can many classes make any significant progress!

If the point is ever to be made, it has been made. But there is one further theory that I must touch upon before we move into the final part of this presentation: the part about the star.

This theory takes the form of a definition. It is a theory developed collaboratively by hundreds of secondary school principals across the land. And it appears to be one of those rare theories upon which the vast majority of America's 150 million educational authorities concur. It's called "The Theory of Measurement of a Good Secondary School English Teacher." And it goes this way:

"A good secondary English teacher, first of all, is a teacher who appears cool, calm, and poised while sweating profusely; a teacher who can effectively manage three or more different class preparations for five or six daily class meetings; a teacher who never sends a student to the office for disciplinary reasons; a teacher who devotes at least 97% of the class time to 'Teaching the Basics'—construed as spelling, punctuation, and avoidance of the split infinitive—and yet who always posts fresh, beautiful student-made bulletin-board displays on Public Schools Night; a teacher who assigns and reads not less than one 500-word composition per student per week in every class—even though that reading alone uses up more than twenty hours per week; a teacher who is available in the classroom for individual tutoring, make-up assignments, and personal consultation before school, after school, and during lunch time—and yet who is ready and willing to serve as adviser to the staff of the school newspaper, yearbook, and/or literary magazine, to coach students for speech contests, and/or to direct at least one annual school stage presentation; a teacher who has an instinctive flair for policing mobs of unruly teenagers—mostly total strangers—during hall and cafeteria duty, as well as while chaperoning rooters' buses, athletic events, school dances, and other extracurricular happenings; a teacher who can be counted upon to arrive promptly for and to participate cheerfully in meetings of the department, the faculty, and the various school-wide and district-wide committees; a teacher who participates regularly and actively in both community affairs and professional associations; and—it goes without saying—a teacher who never complains about being tired, overworked, or underpaid."

A Reader's Digest version of this theory is much more succinct: "A good secondary school English teacher need not be able to walk on water; but he or she never sinks below the ankles."

That may seem to be your cue to say, "O, what's the use?" and to stampede the registration desk for refunds. But let me ask you to think first about the values educational theories—some of them, at least—can offer us. Leading into this concluding section of the presentation, I'd like to offer another, shorter story, written in verse by Hillaire Belloc:

WHO COULD NOT READ AND WAS TOSSED
INTO A THORNY HEDGE BY A BULL

Of Sarah Byng the tale is told
How when the child was twelve years old
She could not read or write a line.

Her sister Jane, though barely nine,
Could spout the Catechism through
And parts of Matthew Arnold too,
While little Bill

who came between
Was quite unnaturally keen
On
'Athalie', by Jean Racine;

But not so Sarah! Not so Sal!
She was a most uncultured girl
Who didn't care a pinch of snuff
For any literary stuff
And gave the classics all a miss.
Observe the consequence of this!
As she was walking home one day,
Upon the fields across her way
A gate, securely padlocked, stood,
And by its side a piece of wood
On which was painted plain and full,

BEWARE THE VERY
FURIOUS BULL.

Alas! The young illiterate
Went blindly forward to her fate,
And ignorantly climbed the gate!

Now happily the Bull that day
Was rather in the mood for play
Than goring people through and through
As Bulls so very often do;
He tossed her lightly with his horns
Into a prickly hedge of thorns,
And stood by laughing while she strode
And pushed and struggled to the road.

The lesson was not lost upon
The child, who since has always gone
A long way round to keep away
From signs, whatever they may say,
And leaves a padlocked gate alone.
Moreover she has wisely grown
Confirmed in her instinctive guess
That literature breeds distress.

That poem has more than mere bovine relevance for this presentation. In case it isn't perfectly clear, let me spell it out:

During these two days, we will hear many theories expounded by various program participants. Naturally, as we listen, we will all want to repeat to ourselves, over and over: "Nothing works! Nothing works!" —But for heaven's sake, let's none of us be Sarah Byngs about it. Let's not turn a deaf ear to any theory, as long as it is fundamentally humane. Even though it won't work—won't apply to all our students or in all circumstances—it may very well provide us with a new ideal to strive toward.

Louisa Mae Alcott, although she isn't remembered as an educator, had something worthwhile to say on this subject:

Far away, there in the sunshine, are my highest aspirations. I may never reach them; but I can look up and see their beauty, believe in them, and try to follow where they lead.

Naive and romantic though it may seem to suggest—particularly in light of the gloomy picture that has just been painted of the plight of the secondary English teacher—let's go into our section meetings not just looking for gimmicks to use on Monday morning. Gimmicks are fine, especially at this difficult time of year; but if I understand correctly, this conference has a more significant purpose: to help you and me re-think what we have been doing in our classes up to now—and consider how we can at least try to do better—not only next Monday, but on all the Mondays and all the other school days beyond.

Let me give you a brief preview of the kinds of theories I think we should be especially alert for:

That even a Sarah Byng may declare a cease fire in her battle with the printed word if we provide her with reading selections she's genuinely interested in.

That although Arch Oglethorpe has been in class only two days since January 27, he might return tomorrow; and, if he does, we must be ready to give him a sincere welcome, along with assurance that—if he's ready to apply himself—he can still make up the bulk of the work he has missed.

These, of course, are very humble, workaday ideas—platitudes, if you will: the kinds of ideas that most education specialists would refuse to dignify with the name theory, but would dismiss with some pejorative label such as "folk wisdom."

Neither are these ideas revolutionary. But then, the same can be said for the theory that we all ought to "do unto others as we would have them do to us." Yet how often most of us need to have that thought revived and refreshed in our memories!

One final sample:

That student writing deserves to be graded for its impact upon a willing, enthusiastic, and sympathetic reader—not according to some intricate computation of its misspellings and its run-on sentences.

These theories aren't based on tables of statistical data or other evidences of research. But they are based on something extremely important: what flesh-and-blood kids, in real classrooms, actually need.

So, what does all I've been saying boil down to?

Well, first, that during this conference our job will be to discover at least one new theory (or one new insight into an already-familiar theory), one new aspiration, one new star to hitch our classroom wagons to. —Chances are, we'll all find many. But even if each of us who have come here finds just one lone star of that kind, one ideal that holds promise for a sizeable number of our students, that discovery by itself will justify the efforts of the many fine people who have developed this conference for us.

Second, as our heads proclaim, with Robert Beck, "Nothing works," or with Sarah Byng, "Theory breeds distress," let our hearts reply, with Robert Browning:

A man's reach must exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

Third, speaking of heaven: However absurd the principals' theoretical measurement of a good secondary school English teacher; however cynical the bell-curve measurement of student accomplishment; however short-sighted and conflicting the countless other self-styled authorities' measurements of both teachers and students—let's keep something else in mind. Nowhere except in heaven is the wisdom required to pass fair judgment on what you and I and our students are struggling, day after day, to achieve in our classrooms.

And fourth—and finally—until heaven hands down that verdict, as surely as we maintain the ideals we began with when we became teachers; as surely as we continue to scan the skies for new ideals, or new insights into old ones; and as surely as we are honest and objective in appraising our own progress toward attainment of those "impossible dreams"—then that surely may we properly trust ourselves to be our own as well as our students' most reliable measures of success.

The very last words of this presentation are not mine. They were written by Robert Frost:

CHOOSE SOMETHING LIKE A STAR

O Star (the fairest one in sight),
 We grant your loftiness the right
 To some obscurity of cloud—
 It will not do to say of night,
 Since dark is what brings out your light.
 Some mystery becomes the proud;
 But to be wholly taciturn
 In your reserve is not allowed.
 Say something to us we can learn
 By heart and when alone repeat.
 Say something!

—And it says, 'I burn.'

—But say with what degree of heat.
 Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
 Use language we can comprehend.
 Tell us what elements you blend.

It gives us strangely little aid,
 But does tell something in the end.
 And, steadfast as Keats' Eremité,
 It asks of us a certain height,
 So when at times the mob is swayed
 To carry praise or blame too far,
 We may choose something like a star
 To stay our minds on and be staid.

Thank you!